

Wisdom from St. Jerome

Based on the article
by Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

The year 2020 marks the 1600th
anniversary of the death of one
of the greatest minds in the
Church's history: St. Jerome

This group resource is an
opportunity to pause and reflect
on the life of St. Jerome and the
lessons we can learn from him.



St Jerome Reading in the Countryside, Giovanni Bellini,
Painting c.1480/85, Source: Wikimedia Commons

Prayer of St. Jerome:

**“O Lord, you have given us
your word for a light to shine
upon our path;**

**grant us so to meditate on that
word, and follow its teaching,**

**that we may find in it the light
that shines more and more
until the perfect day.”**

Amen

Eusebius Hieronymus (Jerome) was born in c.347 AD at Stridon in Dalmatia in the northeast of Italy to a moderately wealthy family. Having received a very good early education in his locality, he proceeded to Rome, like most intelligent young persons at the time, to study rhetoric under the renowned grammarian, Aelius Donatus. Jerome's greatest hunger, the quest for the ascetic life, led him from Rome to Antioch where he lived for a short time as a hermit in the desert of Chalcis. He was ordained a priest in Antioch. On his visit to Rome with his bishop, Paulinus, for the Church Council in 382, Pope Damasus discovered this rare gem and commissioned him to revise the Latin Psalms and the New Testament because of his biblical knowledge. Jerome soon retired to Bethlehem after the death of Pope Damasus, where he spent the last 34 years of his life in a monastery he had founded. He committed these years to assiduous study of the Bible and to writing. He is renowned and praised for his many Commentaries on Scriptures and for his masterpiece, the translation of the Latin Vulgate, which he could only undertake because of his laborious study of the oriental/biblical languages, namely, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.

The fourth century was a time of momentous changes in the history of God's people.

See how you do in this quiz – it's just for fun and the answers might surprise you!

At the time of St. Jerome's Birth (c.347 AD)...

1. Is Rome the capital of the Roman Empire?
2. Has the first council of Nicea happened?
3. Has the New Testament Canon been confirmed?
4. Was Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire?
5. Has St. Augustine been born?

From a Lover of Secular Writings to a Lover of Sacred Scriptures

Reading the Bible may be difficult for many Christians today. Compared to other books especially our favourite novels and classics, it may be dry and uninteresting. This was the same experience of St. Jerome.

Jerome had been an ardent lover of the Classical Latin writings (cf. 53.7). It was difficult for him to let go of these books which he had brought with him from Rome to Bethlehem. His profound love for reading the Scriptures came as a result of a near death experience. "I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgement seat of the Judge... Asked who and what I was I replied: "I am a Christian." But He who presided said: "Thou liest, thou art a follower of Cicero and not of Christ. For 'where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also... Yet for all that I began to cry and to bewail myself, saying: "Have mercy upon me, O Lord: have mercy upon me.... thenceforth I read the books of God with a zeal greater than I had previously given to the books of men" (22.30.) This experience was the turning point in the life of Jerome.

How then do we love the Scriptures like St. Jerome?

This great saint would say, "Love to occupy your mind with the reading of Scripture." (130.7)

Have you experienced a life changing moment in your faith before? If you are comfortable to, please share your experience with the group.

Where do you turn for wisdom in times of crisis?

What do you think of St. Jerome's near death experience?

Sometimes we set aside time in our lives for a monastic retreat. We might go expectant, ready to hear from God. How can we come expectantly to Scripture, to hear from him?

“Love Scriptures”

To love Scriptures, is to love Jesus, the Word of God made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14) and the greatest reward is that Jesus, who is also the Wisdom of God (cf. 1Cor 1:24) will pour out his love in return. This love is a great help to conquering personal weaknesses as Jerome teaches, “Direct both body and mind to the Lord, overcome wrath by patience, love the knowledge of Scripture, and you will no longer love the sins of the flesh” (125.11). A knowledge of the Scriptures increases the love for it and the desire to immerse oneself deeper into it. Jerome writes, “What honey is sweeter than to know the wisdom of God? Others, if they will, may possess riches, drink from a jewelled cup, shine in silks, and try in vain to exhaust their wealth in the most varied pleasures. Our riches are to meditate in the law of the Lord day and night, to knock at the closed door, to receive the ‘three loaves’ of the Trinity, and, when the Lord goes before us, to walk upon the water of the world” (30).

Deepening our love of Scripture takes time, it cannot be hurried. It is a lifetime’s journey. By making time for Scripture we make time for God.

Share your own experiences of spending time reading Scripture or attending Bible study groups.

Would you describe it as something you love to do? If so, why? If not, why not?

Perhaps treat yourself to something sweet to remind yourself of St. Jerome’s words: “What honey is sweeter than to know the wisdom of God?”

“Meditate on the law of the Lord day and night”

Jerome often invited his friends to “meditate on the law of the Lord day and night.” Although a quote from the book of Joshua (1:8), Jerome made this dictum his special guide. Meditating on the word of God meant reading and acting according to the Scriptures. Meditation has a twofold goal – prayer and action. While the first transforms the person, who has the “Scriptures in his hands and prays frequently” (cf. 79.9), the second transforms the people who benefit from the person who has meditated on the Scriptures.

“Learn by heart a portion of the Scripture.” (cf. Letters 22.35)

Jerome insists on committing “a fixed number of lines” (54.11) to memory each day and never to “let the sacred volume be out of your hand” (52.7). In this way the Scriptures will flow through our words and actions. In writing to Eustochium, Jerome advises her to wake up at night and recite some parts of the Scripture she had learnt by heart (22.37). If the Scriptures is our rule of life, we will be guided by it and live according to what God has laid down for us.

The emphasis on study of the Scriptures characterizes Jerome’s writings. He recommends the study of Scriptures for everyone in any state of life. He believes the mind must be willing to learn and study the word of God diligently in order to know the “difference between righteous ignorance and instructed righteousness” (53.3).

How do Ignatian Contemplation and Ignatian Discernment both involve meditating on the Scriptures?

Do you memorise Scripture?

Share your own ideas and tips.

Here are some of our ideas:

- Use a Scripture journaling or colouring book. (e.g. Books of the Bible journal (biblesociety.org.uk/products))
- Follow daily Bible posts on social media. (e.g. @catholicchurch on Instagram or @catholicEW on Twitter)



“Worse to be ignorant of my ignorance” (53.7)

St. Jerome points out that there is a great danger in claiming knowledge of the Scriptures when in fact one has not studied or does not understand it. He cites the example of the Ethiopian Eunuch who confessed his ignorance when Philip asked him what he was reading (Acts 8:27-35). How then do we liberate ourselves from ignorance? Jerome counsels that, “If there is anything of which you are ignorant, if you have doubt about Scripture, ask one whose life commends him, whose age puts him above suspicion, whose reputation does not belie him” (22.29). Jerome knows that it is “difficult to understand the Holy Scriptures” (49.4) and that one cannot open the Holy Scriptures by him/herself (cf. 53.5) and so he proposes a solution. “Have a guide to show you the way” (53.6)

The story of Philip, who helped the Ethiopian Eunuch, serves as a good example for Jerome to explain that there are those commissioned to teach the word of God. “Doing what Scriptures inculcate” (letter 48.15) requires both knowledge and the right guide. This is the role particularly of the clergy. Jerome insists that they (the clergy – priests and bishops) should know the Scriptures, read them constantly and practice them (52.7) because they teach others. Their “words ought to be seasoned by... reading of Scripture” (52.8). Jerome does not exclude anyone from the study of Scriptures, but his rule of thumb is that anyone who must teach the Bible must be well trained in it (54.11).

Session 2 of 2

Read Acts 8:27-35 for the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch

Having a Bible mentor is a helpful way to understand the Scriptures.

Who do you see as your Bible mentor?

As Fr. Jerome summarises here, the laity is not excluded from the study of Scripture.

What obstacles do you face when studying the Scriptures?

Here are a few Bible overview courses you might find useful:

- The Big Picture Course (thebigpicturecourse.org)
- The Bible Timeline (ascensionpress.com)



“I cull these flowers from the holy Scriptures” (130.9)

Jerome allowed the Scriptures to flow from his lips and his ink. He referred to Scripture passages which he quoted so generously in his writings as flowers. This reveals a man who had soaked himself in the divine word such that it permeated every fabric of his being. Jerome invites us to love the Scriptures and allow it to guide our lives.

He believed that “the word of God is a pearl and may be pierced on every side” (Letter 22.8). Thus, it should be employed in addressing various issues in life because it contains “countless divine answers” (22.10). A knowledge of Scriptures, for Jerome, can help in resolving issues that border on every aspect of life, for instance, on the raising children in the way of God (107), grief (39), refuting errors (41.3; 41.4), and for fostering peace and reconciliation (82).

St. Jerome invites us to read the Holy Scriptures following the Sacred Tradition of the Church. The section on “Sacred Scriptures” (CCC 101-133) in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Word, Vatican II) and Verbum Domini (Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI) offer great helps on how to approach the study of the Sacred Word today.

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Session 2 of 2

Do you have a favourite Bible verse? Take time to share these with the group.

What’s your key take away from Fr. Jerome’s article and the discussions you have had? If you feel comfortable to, please share as a group.



FAITH SHARING GUIDELINES (for a 90 minute session)

Leaders

Each group has its own leader who facilitates the process by:

- a) Creating a prayerful, reflective environment with an open Bible and candle.
- b) Guiding the group through the faith sharing process.
- c) Keeping to the times recommended for each part of the session.
- d) Gently including more hesitant members where appropriate - ensuring every participant has the opportunity to talk if they want to.
- e) Agreeing with the group on the confidential nature of the group conversations and respecting differences of opinion throughout each session.

Beginning (about 20 minutes)

Gathering: In the first session, begin with introductions and, in the second session, ask one another how you are, what has happened since you last met, and if someone is new to the group, take some time for introduction.

Praying: After the Gathering begin each session with the prayer of St Jerome.

Middle (about 60 minutes)

Spend about 20 minutes per page. For each page: one group member should be invited to read the section of Fr. Jerome's article aloud, then in smaller groups go through the questions and discuss together, invite feedback from smaller groups to the whole. **The answers to the history quiz (for session 1) and details about Ignatian Contemplation and Discernment (for session 2) are below.**

End (about 10 minutes)

Responding with a call to action: Finally, having reflected and shared, we pray for God's grace to know how to respond.

Praying: End each session with St Jerome's prayer or your own prayers.

You could share some cake/biscuits at the end of session 1 to reflect on St Jerome's reference to Scripture being sweeter than honey. You could give each member a flower at the end of session 2 to reflect on St Jerome referring to Bible verses as flowers.



At the time of St. Jerome's birth (c.347 AD)...

1. Is Rome the capital of the Roman Empire?
No. The capital of the Empire moves to Constantinople in 330 AD. Rome is no longer the centre of power for the Empire and the church begins to grow in power in Rome.
 2. Has the first council of Nicea happened?
Yes. Under the Emperor Constantine the first major council of the church is held in Nicea (modern Turkey) in 325 AD. The second major Council is held at Constantinople in 381 AD. The first council is used to discuss the person and nature of Jesus Christ and led to the Nicene Creed.
 3. Has the New Testament Canon been confirmed?
No. The Canon of the New Testament is confirmed in the 367 AD Easter letter of St. Athanasius. At Councils in 382 AD and 397 AD, final recognition is given. Note that these councils do not 'create' the Christian Scriptures but confirm what was already generally recognised and accepted.
 4. Was Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire?
No. The Emperor Constantine professed Christianity and the church was given legal status; restoring its losses and giving it favoured treatment as one among many tolerated religions. Christianity was officially made the state religion under emperor Theodosius IX in the year 381 AD.
 5. Has St. Augustine been born?
No. St. Augustine was born on 13 November 354 AD. St. Augustine converted in 386 AD. Alongside St. Jerome he would become one of the most important theologians in all of church history.
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Ignatian Contemplation: the reader/listener places themselves personally within the Bible story through imagination; imagining the setting, sights, feels, smells and tastes. For example, imagine you are handed your portion of bread and fish by one of the Apostles after Jesus has multiplied the loaves and fishes. Consider the sea air, the people surrounding you and what you can hear.

Ignatian Discernment: this provides a method for making good decisions when there are several possibilities, all of which are potentially good. One of the 11 steps involves reading over slowly, carefully, and attentively several Scripture passages and talking with God through the verses which are most personally impactful.

For more information go to: www.ignatianspirituality.com, www.jesuit.org.uk

